

Christian Citizenship

“God has rescued us from the power of darkness and has brought us into the kingdom of the Son whom he loves.”

—*Colossians 1:13,*

International

Standard Version

SCRIPTURALLY SPEAKING,

all footstep followers of the Master are citizens of Christ’s kingdom. (Phil 3:20, ISV) That kingdom has not been reigning over the earth throughout the centuries of the Christian age. Nevertheless, it is recognized by God

as a kingdom, and those who have sworn allegiance to him and to his Son, Christ Jesus, are recognized as citizens of it. This means that all true Christians are, in reality, “strangers and pilgrims [Greek: resident foreigners]” here upon the earth, and that their allegiance is to a government that is not recognized by the kingdoms of this world. —I Pet. 2:9-11

Obviously, to be in a position of this kind, calls for a careful scrutiny of God’s Word. Its commands governing the situation must be taken fully into consideration as a guide for the conduct of such “strangers and pilgrims” in a foreign land.

Another element that enters into our study of God's Word bearing on this subject is the fact that as citizens of Christ's kingdom we are expected by God to serve as ambassadors, and thus to represent him in an unfriendly world. (II Cor. 5:20) This, too, calls for a careful study of the divine rules governing God's ambassadors, in order that the kingdom interests of earth's new ruler may be properly represented.

In the study of this subject it is important first of all to consider the great principles underlying the issue. We believe that the most important fundamental is the manner in which it involves one's worship of Jehovah, the true God. While the Christian of this age is not directly under the law that was given to Israel, nevertheless the principles of that law are applicable to the Lord's people at any time. One of those commandments says, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." (Exod. 20:3) The intent of this and associated commands is summed up in the New Testament by Jesus when he said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind."—Matt. 22:37

Surely we must concede that God could not be satisfied with any less degree of loyalty to him than that which is expressed by these words of the Master. It will be seen, therefore, that there may be a possible conflict between this requirement of the Almighty God of the universe and the requirements of obedience exacted by one or another of the governments of this world.

Does this mean, then, that in order to be truly loyal to God we must be disloyal to earthly governments?

Does it mean that there must necessarily be an open conflict between a Christian whose citizenship is in heaven and the civil authorities of this world who do not recognize the king to whom we have sworn allegiance?

These are questions which every consecrated Christian, especially in days like the present, must sooner or later face with conviction and fortitude. They are questions, moreover, which each individual must have satisfactorily answered in his own mind and heart. One Christian cannot decide for another what he or she should do under the circumstances with which they are surrounded. Like all other issues of the Christian life, it becomes a matter for individual decision; and those who are wholly sincere will endeavor to have their decision based upon that which they believe God's Word teaches. The most that any Christian can do for another in the settling of these important issues is to call attention to what the Bible says, and then it remains for each individual to note the proper personal application of the commands of God and obey them.

THE POWERS THAT BE

In Romans 13:1-7 we are given inspired instructions bearing upon the Christian's proper attitude toward the "powers that be." Some may be inclined to argue that the powers here referred to are the spiritual rulers whom God has ordained to care for, instruct and bless his consecrated people. However, this thought is hardly plausible if we take into consideration the entire lesson, for in outlining the details of what is implied in being subject to the powers that be, the apostle explains that it has to

do with such things as paying “taxes to whom taxes are due, tolls to whom tolls are due, fear to whom fear is due, honor to whom honor is due.”—vs. 7, *ISV*

Furthermore, in verse 4, the apostle refers to those who have power over us as bearing swords. We quote, “But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for it is not without reason that they bear the sword. Indeed, they are God’s servants to administer punishment to anyone who does wrong.” (*ISV*) Without question this is a reference to earthly rulers who in the enforcement of their laws sometimes consider it necessary to resort to the force of arms.

When the apostle speaks of paying “taxes” and “tolls,” it is clearly a reference to paying that which is due representatives of earthly governments under the laws of the land. The apostle also affirms that we are to render “fear,” or respect, and “honor” to whom they are due. The thought here is that of respect which the Christian, though a pilgrim and stranger, is expected by God to render unto those who are permitted to exercise rulership prior to the time of the establishment of his kingdom in the earth.

In the third verse of this passage, the apostle says, “For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil.” The thought evidently is, that if we obey these rulers we will not need to be in terror of them. However, the apostle shows that our obedience to these earthly rulers should be more than one produced by a terror of what will happen to us if we disobey, for he further explains in verse 5, “Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath [because of what they may do to you], but also for conscience sake.”

The apostle here is not suggesting that there are never occasions when a consecrated Christian, a citizen of the heavenly kingdom, may have scripturally sound reasons to conscientiously object to obeying laws laid down by earthly governments. The point Paul is emphasizing is that we as Christians should recognize that wholehearted devotion to God calls for obedience to the instructions which he has given. This means that if he has instructed us to render a certain obedience and respect to earthly governments, we may properly be guided by conscience to obey such a divine injunction.

ORDAINED OF GOD

The apostle further explains that the powers that be are “ordained of God.” (Rom. 13:1) The Greek word here translated “ordained” means to arrange, or “set in array.” Evidently the apostle was well acquainted with the manner in which Gentile rulership over the earth was first outlined by God through Daniel, when the prophet explained to Nebuchadnezzar that wherever the children of men dwelt God had given him dominion over them. (Dan. 2:37,38) This divine authorization was prophesied by Daniel as passing on from Babylon to Medo-Persia, then to Greece, and then to Rome. It was in the days of Rome that Paul wrote these words of Romans 13, in which he explains that the powers that be are ordained, or set in array, by God.

According to the time prophecies of the Bible, this period of divine authorization for Gentile rule over Israel, as well as the whole world, was to be a limited one. We believe there is substantial evidence,

both scripturally and historically, that this period, set in array by God, expired at the time of the First World War, which began in 1914. (Lev. 26:17-28; Luke 21:24) Subsequent to the ending of this divine lease of power to the Gentiles, we have seen and continue to see the kingdoms of this world falling into increasing trouble, disarray, and perplexity. However, this does not change the principle of the apostle's instructions relative to our being subject to earthly powers.

It is still true that the followers of Christ are pilgrims and strangers in this world, and that they are ambassadors of the heavenly kingdom soon to be established on earth in place of this old, sinful, and confused order of things. It is also still true that as ambassadors, commissioned to bear witness to the Gospel message, devoted Christians are to deport themselves before these earthly governments in such a way as not to unnecessarily antagonize them and thus prevent their service as representatives of the Lord.

The kingdom of Christ, in which faithful Christians eventually are to be an exalted part, will exercise its divine power in the final dissolution of earthly governments. (Ps. 149:5-9) Yet, the Scriptures make it very clear that the Church in the flesh is not to take part in any anti-government campaign. Rather, it is to continue to be a sacrificing and suffering Church. The honors and glories of the kingdom, and the divine power which is to be given to the Church for use as part of the glorified Christ class, are not to be ours until we have finished our course by being faithful, even unto death. —II Tim. 2:12; Rev. 2:10,26,27

There are no scriptural instructions which change this fundamental principle of the Christian life. As such, we cannot be suffering as an ambassador of Christ and yet reign as kings at the same time. (I Cor. 4:8) This is just as true today, even while we are witnessing great trouble in the earth among peoples and nations, as it was back in the apostle's day. It must necessarily be, therefore, that the rules of Christian citizenship will continue to apply to the consecrated people of God as long as they are in the flesh.

PRAYING FOR PEACE

In I Timothy 2:1,2, the apostle says, "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty." Here is another inspired instruction which those who "have no other gods" before them are to obey. The apostle does not say that we should pray for God's approval of present earthly leaders, nor does he say we should pray for divine blessing upon their unrighteousness. What he does say is the objective of our prayers for kings should be that we lead as quiet and peaceable life as possible in "godliness and honesty."

The intent of such a prayer is obvious. It is a proper follow-up of our obedience to the inspired commands relative to giving proper respect to earthly governments. The purpose of it is that we, as ambassadors of the Lord, may have an opportunity, in a peaceable, dignified way, to bear witness concerning the King of kings and Lord of lords.—Rev. 19:16

If it be proper that we render obedience to earthly governments with this objective in view, certainly it is also proper that we make this part of our Christian life a matter of prayer. Furthermore, inasmuch as these instructions come to us from the Lord, to whom we have vowed full allegiance, it means that in no sense of the word can it be construed as a compromise when we endeavor to so conduct ourselves in the world in order that we will have the largest possible opportunity to bear witness to the kingdom message.

To “live peaceably,” however, is not the single objective of the Christian life. James says that the “wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable.” (James 3:17) We are to live peaceably with all men insofar as possible, the apostle tells us, but this cannot be a peace at any price. (Rom. 12:18) When the laws of God are in direct conflict with the laws of men the obedient Christian has no alternative but to obey God, irrespective of what the consequences may be. Often such obedience to God will lead to suffering and persecution, and, at times during the Christian age, has led even to death.

HONOR THE KING

In I Peter 2:17-19, we have further enlightening instructions concerning proper deportment for citizens of the heavenly kingdom. Here the apostle says, “Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king. Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward. For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully.”

Some interesting points appear here. For example, we are to honor all men, but we are to love the brotherhood. We are to honor kings, but we are to fear, or reverence God. Another point worthy of note is that servants are to be subject to their masters whether the masters be kind and gentle to them or not. Explaining the reason for this the apostle says, that if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully, it is thankworthy.

Still another of the inspired commands of God's Word is that of Titus 3:1-4. "Be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work, To speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, shewing all meekness unto all men. For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another. But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared."

Here we are told to "speak evil of no man." As the apostle is writing of earthly powers, evidently the "no man," in this instance, refers specially to these. This, of course, does not mean that the rulers of this present evil world are so righteous that they are above reproach. What the apostle evidently means is that inasmuch as the Lord permits these rulers to exercise authority in the world, it is not for us to oppose them. "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord," and this being true, he has made it plain that it is not our business as Christians to regulate the affairs of earthly governments of which we are not a part.—Rom. 12:19

Returning to his words to Titus, Paul says that we are not to be brawlers, but are, rather, to be gentle and meek to all men. How much better all Christians can serve as ambassadors of Christ when they obey these instructions. In verse 3 Paul indicates that if we are brawlers, living in malice and envy, and hating others, it means that we have not yet been separated from the spirit of the world. Let the world and its rulers do their own evil speaking—let them rail out against each other if they will. It is our business to be gentle and meek, and thereby to reflect the kindness and love of our Heavenly Father and his Son, Christ Jesus, who manifested his love to the entire sinful world through the great sacrifice that was made on their behalf.

READY FOR GOOD WORKS

The apostle tells Titus, and us, that we are to be “ready to every good work.” (Tit. 3:1) Obedience to many of the laws of the land comes within this category of good works. At times earthly governments may demand that which Christians could not properly consider good works, and it is in such cases that each one will find it important to be able to decide as to that which belongs to Caesar and that which belongs to God.—Matt. 22:21

Over the past century, one of the major issues that has confronted many of the consecrated children of God is that which has to do with obedience to earthly governments in matters pertaining to military service. This issue must of necessity be given prayerful consideration inasmuch as the instruction of God’s Word is “Thou shalt not kill.”—Exod. 20:13; Matt. 5:21,22

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(Continued from page 31) In the United States, even this uncompromising command of God need not necessarily lead a Christian to be disobedient to the government. Indeed, the government of the United States recognizes that some have conscientious objections to combative military service for religious reasons, and recognizing this, provision is made for their exemption. For anyone to claim the provisions of this clause, it is not an act of disobedience to the government, but rather the accepting of a provision which the government itself has made.

The laws of the United States provide the conscientious objector with the privilege of accepting non-combatant service should a draft, or conscription, be instituted. This is a service which does not involve the actual taking of human life. It is a service, on the other hand, which frequently provides opportunity of actually doing good to others, such as hospital work and other areas of service for the benefit of the country's citizens.

This type of service can doubtless be considered as coming under the heading of "good works" mentioned by the apostle. As we expressed at the outset of this discussion, no Christian can lay down rules for the governing of other Christians. Therefore, the exact manner in which each individual applies the instructions of God's Word in his or her own case is something which must be decided by each individual alone. Neither should we criticize or condemn those who may not decide these questions exactly as we may do.

Of this we can be reasonably certain, that those who are in harmony with the apostle's instructions, "gentle, shewing all meekness unto all men,"

will find that gentleness and meekness will, in most cases, appeal to those who are in charge of the administration of the laws of the land. On account of this whatever stand a follower of Christ takes will be more likely to be respected and they themselves treated accordingly, than if they should rail against the government and all things else concerned, in order to show loyalty to God.

BE SEPARATE FROM THE WORLD

Christians are instructed to remain separate from the world. Yet, the Apostle Paul states, “I wrote to you ... that you were not to associate with fornicators; not that in this world you are to keep wholly aloof from such as they, any more than from people who are avaricious and greedy of gain, or from worshippers of idols. For that would mean that you would be compelled to go out of the world altogether.” (I Cor. 5:9,10, *Weymouth New Testament*) Here is a wise saying, full of sound judgment. It shows that as long as Christians are in the flesh and living in a world of sin which is ruled by those who are imperfect, they will find it necessary to be in association somewhat with the ways and methods of the world.

As but one example, the principle of this text may be very readily applied to the matter of military service. Reasoning from the standpoint of the command, “Thou shalt not kill,” some will feel they have been obedient if they refrain from the actual taking of another’s life. Others, equally sincere, will reason that to have any part whatsoever in military affairs would be a violation of this command. Some may even conclude that to handle freight or goods that may be destined for military use, would be displeasing to God.

Our thought is that the apostle's instruction noted above might well apply here. If we carry this point to too great an extreme we would need to "go out of the world," for today there is very little happening in the commercial world that is not directly or indirectly associated with militarism, to say nothing of immoral conduct, greediness, avarice, and other behavior not sanctioned in the Bible.

THE APOSTOLIC EXAMPLE

Studying the example of the apostles we find that they were indeed obedient to the governments of their day. When through no fault of their own, they were arraigned before earthly courts, they were very respectful to those who tried them. When the Jewish religionists forbade them to preach the Gospel, they ignored the command, and continued the ministry, for these were not the powers that were ordained of God. (Acts 4:18-20; 5:28,29) However, when the civil authorities requested them to leave the city they did so without protest. (Acts 16:39,40) On another occasion, when severely persecuted, they "shook off the dust of their feet," as Jesus had instructed, and moved to other fields.—Acts 13:49-51; Matt. 10:14

The Apostle Paul, for example, addressed one of the rulers as "Most noble Festus." (Acts 26:25) Paul did not mean that he was in harmony with everything that Festus did. He did not mean that he was willing to cooperate in the government of which Festus was a part. Paul's attitude was simply an example of how he understood the divine will in the matter of being subject to the powers that be, hence, was giving honor and respect to whom it was due.

Paul was a Roman citizen, and for a very good reason he made use of his Roman citizenship in order to forward the interests of the kingdom of heaven, to which his allegiance had been sworn. By claiming the advantages of his Roman citizenship Paul was not renouncing his citizenship in the heavenly kingdom. On the contrary, he was being subject to the powers that be and using the laws of those powers the best way he knew how in order to make his ambassadorship for the heavenly King a more effective one.

To summarize, it seems that the reasonable course for the Christian is to be respectful of earthly governments and to obey them in all matters that do not conflict directly with counter-commands of God. To the extent that we live in a land in which we enjoy many blessings—especially the privilege of meeting together as Christians—let us be thankful to the Heavenly Father for such a condition. Just as importantly, let us pray for those of the Lord’s people who do not enjoy such freedoms as we do, that divine care and providence will overrule on their behalf in whatever their experiences in this world might be.

Finally, let all true Christians be thankful to the Lord for the privileges and blessings which they enjoy in each and every different circumstance of life. As we do so, let us also remember, as Paul said: “Our citizenship, ... is in heaven, and it is from there that we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus, the Messiah. He will change our unassuming bodies and make them like his glorious body through the power that enables him to bring everything under his authority.”—Phil. 3:20,21, *ISV* ■